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Philosophy in Vergil

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Philosophy in Vergil

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CHAPTER THREE

PHILOSOPHY IN VERGIL

JOSEPH FARRELL

Pythagorae sectam versat, quam et stoici sequuntur. Et quidam accusant quod, cum sit Epicureus, alienam sectam usurpare videtur. Sed ego puto simpliciter referri sententias philosophorum: neque enim statim Epicureus debet videri, si libertate poetica ait [Geo. 4.563–64] “illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat / Parthenope, studiis florentem ignobilis oti.”
(DServ. *ad Geo.* 4.219)

(He is dealing here with the sect of Pythagoras, which the Stoics follow, as well. And some blame him because they think that, although he is an Epicurean, he is adopting the position of a different sect. But I think that the opinions of the philosophers are alluded to for their own sake; and that accordingly he should not automatically be thought an Epicurean if he says, with poetic license, “at that time, sweet Parthenope sustained me, Vergil, flourishing in the pursuits of undistinguished leisure.”)¹

Vergil has always enjoyed a reputation as a poet interested in philosophical questions, and any reader of his poetry will understand why this is so. He has also frequently been regarded as an adherent of some particular philosophical school, and opinion about this matter depends largely on a substantial body of ancient testimony about Vergil’s philosophical beliefs.

¹ For Vergil I use the text of Mynors (1969). For Servius I follow the Harvard edition where available [i.e., Rand et al. (1946) for *Aen.* 1–2, Stocker and Travis (1965) for *Aen.* 4–5], otherwise that of Thilo and Hagen (1878–1902). Although I occasionally refer in a general way to ‘Servius,’ I do of course recognize important differences in the ways that different versions of this commentary tradition approach the text of Vergil, and in quoting specific passages I distinguish between (1) the commentary compiled by Servius himself, which I print in regular Roman type, and (2) the additions of DServ, which I print in italics; in addition, I print the Vergilian lemmata in bold and occasionally use underlining as well for emphasis. All translations are my own.

We may speak, very broadly, of three main ideas, all of them attested in antiquity and adopted in one form or other by modern scholars:

1. Vergil was an Epicurean throughout his life.
2. Vergil began with an orientation towards Epicureanism which he eventually abandoned in favor of a more spiritual outlook deriving from some other school.
3. Vergil was not a strict adherent of this or that school but an eclectic interested more in philosophical questions than in systems of orthodoxy.

The balance of scholarly opinion favoring one or another of these perspectives has varied over time. Certainly it would be impossible to claim that there exists at the present moment any real consensus.

My own view is that we do not have the evidence that one would need to draw firm conclusions about Vergil's actual beliefs at *any* point in his life.² Moreover, efforts to describe a specific trajectory of philosophical development must be treated with particular skepticism, for two reasons. First, such trajectories as are described in the ancient commentary and *vita* tradition are characteristic components of fictive biographical criticism. That is to say, those passages that appear to contain independent evidence about Vergil's philosophical beliefs are likely to be nothing more than inferences drawn from his poetry, like most of the other biographical 'evidence' found in these sources.³ Once this much is understood, it follows that modern scholarship is in more or less the same position of

² The idea that Vergil started out as an adherent of Epicureanism but eventually embraced different philosophical beliefs derives from the ancient biographical tradition [Brugnoli and Stok (1997) 284 s.v. *Vergilii studia apud Sironem philosophum*; Stok (2010) 116]. This testimony receives equivocal support from a couple of poems (5 and 8) included among the *Catalepton* of the *Appendix Vergiliana*; but since several components of the *Appendix* were clearly not written by Vergil himself, the authenticity of everything within it has to be questioned. The autobiographical poems with which we are concerned are among the few that some scholars have been inclined to accept as genuinely Vergilian. Many years ago, in the heyday of biographical criticism, these poems seemed to offer valuable testimony corroborating the testimony of the ancient *vita* tradition.

³ The landmark study in this field remains Lefkowitz (1981) on the *vitae* of the Greek poets, which revealed the essential fictiveness of the entire genre, emphasizing that most of the 'facts' that they contain are really inferences based on passages within the poets' own works. Subsequently the entire genre of poet's biographies, in Greek and Latin, has justly come to be treated with great skepticism.

A chronological survey of Vergil's three major works is both a convenient way to proceed and an effective way of bringing out certain aspects in his treatment of philosophy that remain constant over his career, as well as some points of difference. Not all of these are commonly acknowledged or appreciated. In the course of this survey I shall be referring frequently to passages of the ancient commentaries and *vitae* in order to illustrate the different ways in which they can enhance or, if read uncritically, confuse our understanding of philosophy in Vergil.

The *Eclogues* are not Vergil's most overtly philosophical work, and yet a number of passages invoke philosophical ideas and motifs. The most explicit of these is found in *Eclogue* 6 at the beginning of Silenus' song:

*Namque canebat uti magnum per inane coacta
semina terrarumque animaeque marisque fuissent
et liquidi simul ignis; ut his exordia primis,
omnia—et ipse tener mundi concreverit orbis;
tum durare solum et discludere Nerea ponto
coeperit—et rerum paulatim sumere formas;
iamque novum terrae stupeant lucescere solem,
altius atque cadant summotis nubibus umbres,
incipiant silvae cum primum surgere, cumque
rara per ignaros errent animalia montis.*
(Ecl. 6.31-40)

(For he sang how seeds of earths and breath and sea, and also of bright fire, had been set in motion throughout the great void; how from these first elements [came] all beginnings, and even the delicate globe assumed its form, and then the soil began to harden, to confine Nereus in the sea, and gradually to assume the shapes of things; and how now the lands look in amazement at the shining sun, and how rains fall on high after clouds move in, when woods first start to rise and when animals wander here and there through unknowing mountains.)

Servius' comments on this passage are instructive. He notes that at line 41 Silenus leaves behind philosophy ("relictis prudentibus rebus de mundi origine") and changes over to mythology ("subito ad fabulas transitum fecit"), flagging the transition as an interpretive problem ("quaestio est hoc loco"), which must mean that its abruptness (n.b. "subito") attracted attention and discussion in antiquity. And this is understandable, because Vergil's approach here is eclectic almost to the point of self-contradiction. Right through the first word of the second line (*namque canebat uti magnum per inane coacta / semina*, *Ecl.* 6. 31-32) Silenus' song sounds as if it were a quotation of Lucretius, and its meaning is perfectly Epicurean: it suggests that the physical universe consists only of atoms (*semina*) and void (*inane*). But, as we discover directly, the word *semina* is qualified by a series of genitives (*terrarumque animaeque marisque fuissent / et liquidi simul ignis*, *Ecl.* 6.32-33) that name the four elements (or 'roots') of a different physical system, that of Empedocles. The sentence, then, is strange; for if one considers it from a strictly Epicurean or Empedoclean perspective, *semina terrarum etc.* is a contradiction in terms. Epicurean atoms are not identified with the various compounds, such as earth, air, fire, and water, that are made from them, nor are the four elements of the Empedoclean universe made of atoms. So Vergil has combined two different physical theories into an odd hybrid. Servius however thinks otherwise. Here is his comment on the passage:

Namque canebat uti magnum per inane coacta semina variae sunt philosophorum opiniones de rerum origine: nam alii dicunt omnia ex igne procreari, ut Anaxagoras; alii ex umore, ut Thales Milesius, unde est "Oceanumque patrem" [*Geo.* 4.382]; alii ex quattuor elementis, ut Empedocles, secundum quem ait Lucretius "ex imbri terra atque anima nascuntur et igni" [1.715]. (Serv. *ad Ecl.* 6.31)

(For he sang how seeds set in motion throughout the great void Philosophers hold different opinions about the origin of the universe: for some, like Anaxagoras, say that everything was generated from fire; others, like Thales of Miletus, from water, which lies behind "and father Ocean" [*Geo.* 4.382]; others from four elements, such as Empedocles, according to

whom, Lucretius says, "they are born from rain, earth and wind and fire) [1.715].

So far, so good: Servius merely contrasts Empedocles with the monists Thales and Anaxagoras and reports on his theory of the four elements as it is summarized by Lucretius, with no implication that Lucretius holds similar views. In fact, Servius goes on to say that Epicureans do not agree with Empedocles on this point, because they posit just two first causes of the universe, and different ones, body and void. But, he continues,

de his itaque duobus principiis volunt quattuor ista procreari, ignem, aerem, aquam, terram, et ex his cetera, ut illa duo elementa, *atomi et inane*, sint haec vero quattuor syntheta, id est composita ex illis duobus, praestent originem aliis omnibus rebus. (Serv. *ad Ecl.* 6.31)

(And so it is from these two first causes that they would have it that those four, fire, air, water, earth, are generated, and from these all the rest, so that the former two are elements, *atoms and void*, while the latter four 'syntheses,' that is, composites of the former two [elements], account for the origin of all other things.)

This account then is reasonably well-informed; certainly in describing the basic tenets of different philosophical theories, Servius is on target. But in reconciling the atomic theory of the Epicureans with the four-element theory of Empedocles he goes too far, writing as if earth, air, fire, and water had some special place in Epicurean accounts of the universe—as of course they do not.⁴ In particular, they do not enjoy a privileged ontological status as secondary elements, less fundamental than atoms and void, but sufficiently fundamental that all other substances can be regarded as being made out of some combination of them. That however is what Servius suggests, as if the Epicureans had made a point of incorporating Empedocles' ideas into their own.

In explicating this passage, one of Servius' motives is to save Vergil from appearing to confuse different theories. That is of course just what Vergil is doing—deliberately, no doubt, and not out of ignorance (as Servius perhaps feared his readers might suppose). But it is very much in keeping with Servius' general principles as a grammarian to save Vergil

⁴ We possess no ancient testimony apart from this that anyone ever attempted to assign the four elements a special place in Epicurean physics. The point needs emphasis, because some experts [e.g. Furley (1989) 174] have written as though such evidence did exist. Sedley [(1998) 16–21] shows decisively that Epicureans did not regard Empedocles as an important philosophical (as opposed to poetic) forerunner.

from appearing to be in error, philosophically no less than in terms of Latinity.⁵ Such principles are often at odds with Vergil's provocatively eclectic approach, and this passage is a case in point.

But we can and should say a bit more. For Servius does recognize Vergil's eclecticism, at least within limits: note how he specifies that Vergil is following the Epicureans 'now' ("Epicurei vero, quos nunc sequitur", Serv. *ad Ecl.* 6.31), even as he goes on to quote a passage of the *Georgics* that he sees as alluding to yet another physical philosopher, Thales of Miletus, who considered the primal element to be water.⁶ Thus Servius apparently accepts with ease the idea that Vergil might allude to different and even incompatible philosophical schools *in different poems*.⁷ Within *Eclogue* 6, though, Servius evidently wants to find consistency, finding potential for embarrassment in Vergil's *combination* of Epicurean atomism with Empedocles' four-element theory. In this way the grammarian recognizes Vergil's eclectic tendencies, attempting to reconcile them with his own sense of decorum only at the local level.

But there is still more: for, finally and very importantly, Servius' exegesis of *Eclogue* 6 depends very heavily upon what he thinks he knows about Vergil's biography, and this factor without a doubt complicates his reaction to the poem's eclecticism. In his introduction to the poem Servius informs the reader that Silenus is an allegorical representation of the Epicurean philosopher Siro (note the similarity between the names), while Chromis and Mnasyllus are Vergil and Varius, respectively. Servius further believes that Siro was Vergil's teacher; thus his conviction that Vergil would write as an Epicurean at this early point in his career. The intrusion

⁵ For a good example that involves the meaning of the word *saevus* (*Aen.* 1.4, 12.107) see Knox (1997).

⁶ Arist. *Metaph.* A 3, 983b.

⁷ Another version of this note in the commentary wrongly attributed to the grammarian Probus canvasses numerous ancient theories of matter in order to help the reader gain some purchase on this puzzling passage. Like Servius, this commentator is concerned with consistency, but in a precisely converse way; for he cares much less about the coherence of the passage than he does about the fact that the physics propounded here by Silenus does not appear to agree with what Anchises has to say in *Aeneid* 6. Both Silenus and Anchises, he assumes, present Vergil's actual views, which he further assumes ought to remain consistent from one end of his career to the other. He therefore resorts to some special pleading to argue that they are. But in fact, the apparent difference is real. Silenus' physics, though it combines two quite different views (Epicurean and Empedoclean) of elemental matter, does at least present a kind of materialist cosmogony; Anchises' discourse, however, draws on Platonic, Pythagorean, and other ideas to give an eschatological account of metempsychosis. See further below, n. 50.

of Empedocles thus creates a problem that Servius 'solves' by giving earth, air, fire, and water a status in Epicureanism that they did not really have. But the problem would not exist if Servius did not regard the poem as an allegorical episode in Vergil's philosophical biography—i.e. if Servius did not think it incumbent upon him to explain how the poem illustrates Vergil's adherence to the teachings of Siro at this point in his career.⁸

Biographical allegory is a very prominent feature of Servius' *Eclogues* commentary. The principle is applied flexibly in a way that is convenient for the exegete but rather at variance with most forms of reliable interpretive technique. Servius announces his policy in poem 1 when he notes that Tityrus is to be understood as Vergil, not everywhere in the *Eclogues*, "but only where the sense demands it."⁹ In spite of the glaring circularity involved, this principle has been cited with approval by some modern scholars. In a superficial way, it might seem to agree with Vergil's usual method of creating characters: there are indeed frequent points of similarity between his *dramatis personae* and actual people outside his poetry, and these correspondences are indeed shifting and inconsistent.¹⁰ But to say that Tityrus ever 'is' Vergil or that Aeneas 'is' Augustus runs a serious risk of greatly overstating the nature and especially the extent of the relationship. For that matter, in the *Eclogues* it is not clear even that 'Tityrus' (or any other bucolic character named in the poems) is 'the same person' in any two passages.¹¹ Finally, when Servius' commentary on these poems is so devoted to biographical allegory as to state that practically every character in the collection stands for one of Vergil's

⁸ Servius' conception of Epicureanism partakes of quite serious aspects, such as the elemental theory that I have just been discussing, and also of vulgar misconceptions: in his note on the identity of the beautiful Naiad Aegle, who joins Chromis and Mnasyllus in their prank (*Ecl.* 6.20–22), he observes that "quibus [i.e. Chromi et Mnasyllus] ideo coniungit puellam, ut ostendat plenam sectam Epicuream, quae nihil sine voluptate vult esse perfectum" (and to them he adds the girl in order to show in full the character of the Epicurean sect, which has it that nothing is complete without pleasure) (*ad Ecl.* 6.13).

⁹ Servius *ad Ecl.* 1.1: "et hoc loco Tityri sub persona Vergilium debemus accipere; non tamen ubique, sed tantum ubi exigit ratio" (also, in this passage we ought to understand Vergil behind the mask of Tityrus; not everywhere, though, but only where the sense demands it).

¹⁰ J. Griffin (1982) 118–134.

¹¹ Coleman [(1977) 25] has some good remarks on this point, but his conclusion that "there is nothing much to be gained (or for that matter lost) from a general assumption that the recurrence of the same name is significant" suggests that there is more to say.

friends or acquaintances, it is impossible not to suspect that the entire interpretive process is driven by a belief in the method itself as a hermeneutic device rather than being informed by any independent evidence whatsoever.¹²

Discovering that philosophy is a theme in Silenus' song might be thought to tell us nothing about the collection as a whole, since poem 6 is atypical of the *Eclogues* in so many ways. But before drawing this conclusion let us consider another sudden irruption of philosophy into the bucolic world.

In poem 3 the rustic Menalcas offers to stake a pair of cups in a singing match against Damoetas, and these cups allude to philosophical ideas in two distinct ways. Most obviously, they contain images of the astronomer Conon of Samos and of an unnamed figure who described the entire *orbis terrarum* together with the progression of the seasons. The areas of knowledge thus indicated had been traditional philosophical topics since the days of the pre-Socratics; and they remained closely identified with philosophy in Vergil's day (and long thereafter). But the motif of decorated drinking cups is adapted from Theocritus' first *Idyll*, where a goatherd offers Thyrsis such a cup as payment for singing him the song of Daphnis.¹³ Theocritus' description of the cup reflects the central concerns of the bucolic world, but does so in a way that is clearly indebted to Homer's description of Achilles' shield in *Iliad* 18; and that passage was regarded by ancient critics as an allegorical image of the cosmos.¹⁴ Thus

¹² Note, for instance, that there is no textual motivation for Servius' identification of Chromis and Mnasyllus as Vergil and Varius. Presumably, once it was decided that Silenus was Siro, the logic of allegorical exegesis dictated that Silenus' pupils must be those of Siro, as well.

¹³ In *Id.* 1 Thyrsis simply barter his cup for the goatherd's song. The motif of a wager in a contest is imported from *Id.* 8.11–24. On the relationship between these motifs in the context of bucolic exchange see Farrell (1992); on the question of aesthetic value in *Ecl.* 3, Farrell (2012) 288–290.

¹⁴ This interpretation evidently was first proposed by Crates of Mallos [Porter (1992) 91 n. 66], who visited Rome in about 158 B.C. (Suet. *De Gramm.* 2.1) and so postdates Theocritus by a century or so. We therefore have no evidence that Theocritus knew of any interpretation of Achilles' shield that had cosmic implications, and so must assume that Vergil imports the theme of philosophy into his imitation of Theocritus along with an exegetical tradition, later than Theocritus, of the Homeric passage that was Theocritus' model (for a similar possible move, see n. 20 below). Vergil's motive in so doing may be to indicate his understanding of Theocritus' imitative process, and perhaps also to measure the generic gap between the world depicted on Homer's epic shield and on Theocritus' bucolic

Vergil, by depicting natural philosophers within an ecphrasis modeled on that of Theocritus, closes the hermeneutic circle and does so with humor, representing his humble rustics as the kind of people who would own and value such artifacts.¹⁵

The passage implicitly represents a second philosophical topic, that of aesthetics. Menalcas not only possesses these remarkable cups, but is able to speak knowledgeably about their artistic qualities. He mentions their material, beech wood (*fagina*, 37), which is emblematic of the pastoral world that he inhabits. He praises their workmanship, boasting that they are the creation of a famous artist, the 'divine' Alcimedon (*caelatum divini opus Alcimedontis*, the work of the divine Alcimedon, in bas-relief, 3.37). He specifies that they are not for everyday use, but are collector's items that he keeps carefully tucked away (*necdum illis labra admovi, sed condita servo*, I have not yet put my lips to them, but keep them put away, 3.43). Again, these motifs are borrowed from Theocritus, and on one level they are to be read as transmutations of Homeric values: where Homer's heroes cherish gifts of ancient pedigree handed down from the chivalrous past and glory in exchanging these totemic artifacts among one another, Theocritus' rude mechanicals participate in a similar gift economy, but on a much reduced scale. Moreover, Theocritus' goatherd for his part is something of an aesthete, and Vergil's shepherds, in imitation of him, are able to discuss the aesthetic values in quite specific terms. But Vergil introduces an additional sophistication: Damoetas himself has a pair of cups very similar to those of Menalcas, the work in fact of the same artist (*D. et nobis idem Alcimedon duo pocula fecit*, The very same Alcimedon made two cups for me, as well, 44). He treasures his own cups just as much as Menalcas does his, a point that Damoetas drives home by repeating Menalcas' words exactly (line 47 = 43), thus suggesting that the

cup, both of which in a sense he includes in his own poem. For more on this relationship see Farrell (1997) 224–228.

¹⁵ In the earlier poem, Damoetas mentions a pair of cups on which is depicted the figure of Orpheus; and in *Eclogue* 6 as well the philosophically eclectic cosmogony with which Silenus begins actually quotes the beginning of the cosmogony sung by Orpheus himself in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. Further Orphic motifs are found in his song, particularly Silenus' enchantment of the landscape in 27–30 and the surprising attribution of similar powers to Hesiod in line 71. These references invite the reader to consider Orpheus in both passages as an emblem of 'philosophical poetry,' particularly in the form of natural philosophy. Furthermore, it seems apparent that the Orphic label (whatever else it may be doing) helps to prevent the philosophy involved from being identified with any individual school or sect. On Orpheus and 'scientific' poetry see Ross (1975) 23–27, 66, 70, 93–96, 105.

two pairs of cups are not just equivalent but virtually identical. Having read this, we realize it was already suspicious that the *unique* cup described by Theocritus' goatherd had become the *pair* of cups wagered by Damoetas: the motif of doubling hints that the cups, however much Menalcas and Damoetas may value them, may not in fact be masterpieces but comparatively run-of-the-mill products. This hint is corroborated when Menalcas states that the cups are not worth the heifer that he had himself already staked (48).

Here the debate goes beyond pure aesthetics to raise the question of converting aesthetic value into economic value.¹⁶ This motif is present in Theocritus as well, but it is presented (in keeping with the placid tenor of the Theocritean world) unproblematically: Thyrsis' song is beautiful, well worth the promised cup. But in Vergil, even two of Alcimedon's cups are not worth a heifer; and it is not made clear, once Menalcas and Damoetas have finished their contest, which of them is the better singer—or even if either of them is any good at all.¹⁷ Questions are thus raised about aesthetic value per se, about the convertibility of aesthetic value into economic value, and so forth. These are questions that readers of the *Eclogues*—particularly the members of the patron class (such as Pollio, whom Vergil compliments later in this poem as both a discerning reader and a stylish writer¹⁸)—must have found unusually interesting, since they were in a position of acting upon them all the time. But the poem is content merely to raise these questions, without providing any answer to them.

In spite of the critical aporia with which the third *Eclogue* concludes, aesthetic value is a central concern throughout the collection, a special issue being the value of song, not just in the world of bucolic fantasy but in the world of the poet himself, who lived in a time of civil war, wholesale dispossession, and summary execution. "Our songs," laments Moeris in *Eclogue* 9, "have as much power compared to the war god's weapons as do swans compared to an attacking eagle."¹⁹ The poems allude repeatedly to a Theocritean world in which song is sufficient—a world

¹⁶ Farrell (1992).

¹⁷ The fact that Palaemon declines to adjudicate the match (*Ecl.* 3.108) could imply a negative judgment on both efforts [so Servius *ad Ecl.* 3.111, followed by Perret (1961) 44 and Leach (1974) 181]; although he goes on ironically to pronounce them both worthy of the prize (*Ecl.* 3.109), he adds that the same is true of anyone who will feel the pangs of love (*Ecl.* 3.109–110). Note that his criterion is depth of feeling rather than technical accomplishment.

¹⁸ *Ecl.* 3.84–87.

¹⁹ *Ecl.* 9.11–13.

effectively created by and for song—only to expose that world as a pleasant but utopian fiction in comparison to the one in which Vergil's readers actually lived.

This sober elenchus is philosophical in a very general sense, but it can also be connected to a more strictly defined (once again) aesthetic debate. Like Theocritus, Vergil in the *Eclogues* makes much of the connection between poetry and music. His shepherds are singers and pipers; they make beautiful sounds. A great deal of emphasis is placed on this idea and on the close resemblance of the shepherds' artful singing to the beautiful sounds of artless nature; and this emphasis could reflect theoretical debates regarding the proper criteria for judging, and presumably composing, poetry. Such debates, which involved the idea that the main, proper, or only criterion for judging a poem was how it sounded, and that such considerations as what it said or whether it was even intelligible were of secondary, little, or absolutely no importance, were characteristic of Hellenistic philosophy.²⁰ The early history of euphonist theory is difficult to reconstruct; in particular, we cannot say whether Theocritus composed with reference to this debate. But Vergil, writing in the thirties B.C., might have opportunistically treated the considerable emphasis that his model placed on beautiful sound *per se* as a reason for alluding to these ideas in his reworking of the genre. According to this logic, Theocritus' 'green cabinet,' in virtue of what can be regarded as its hermetically secure self-referentiality, would align itself more closely (even if tendentiously on Vergil's part) with the non-referential, content-free aesthetic of the euphonists, while the comparative realism of Vergilian bucolic, in which the pastoral pleasance is invaded by historically identifiable political and military forces, would expose the limitations of any literary or critical approach that did not take content more seriously.²¹

²⁰ Most of what we know about this debate comes from Philodemus' treatise *On poetry*, which is very largely concerned to rebut the euphonists. On the possibility that Philodemus' views influenced Vergil and some of his contemporaries, see the Appendix to this paper.

²¹ To be clear, I am not suggesting that Theocritus was a euphonist or that he himself intended his poetry as an intervention in the euphonist debate. Indeed, it is not clear whether this debate had really even begun to take shape at the time when Theocritus wrote. The point is rather that Vergil may be seen as interpreting a key Theocritean motif in the light of an intervening philosophical debate in which Theocritus can have taken no part; for a similar case cf. n. 15 above. This is of course a standard way of interpreting earlier poetry developed especially by those critics who regarded Homer as anticipating all subsequent philosophical speculation.

The evidence examined so far establishes a few important points. The *Eclogues* do allude to philosophical questions. Some of these are fundamental and perennial questions having to do with metaphysics, physics, and natural science, while others are of more limited and even topical import. Some issues are raised overtly and even ostentatiously, others almost covertly or, at least, casually and unobtrusively. Some philosophical topics are unmistakably connected with the names of individual philosophers or schools, while others are not. No general effort to be consistent is in evidence; indeed, where two different philosophical perspectives are overtly combined, the desired effect may be that the reader should notice the incompatibility between the two perspectives. But ancient critics attempted to explain the philosophy of the *Eclogues* as they did other elements in the poems, by referring them to what they thought they knew about Vergil's biography; and they attempted to resolve any philosophical inconsistencies by misrepresenting his philosophical sources and by imagining that his own philosophical views and allegiances developed over time in ways that the poetry allowed them to trace. As we shall see, these same principles inform Vergil's subsequent work and its reception.²²

Philosophy in the *Georgics*

The unexpectedly prominent appearance of natural philosophy in Vergil's earliest poetry anticipates a dominant theme of his subsequent work. David Ross has shown that the four-element theory of physical philosophy, which was influential in many areas throughout antiquity, is of capital importance in the *Georgics*.²³ Throughout this poem, the play of opposites—hot and cold, wet and dry, and the manifestations of these principles in earth, air, fire, and water—informs the structure of Vergil's discourse from the level of diction and imagery to the largest argumentative and organizational structures. But while these motifs are pervasive, they are deployed in ways that are often paradoxical and generally not in keeping with rigorous philosophical exposition.

As Ross demonstrates, when the Georgic poet teaches how to increase a field's fertility, he recommends burning the stubble that is left after harvesting, an effective measure, as the poet says, either because the fire

²² Aesthetics is a very frequent theme in the *Eclogues* (see e.g., 3, 5, 7, 9.32–36). Other traditional topics of philosophical inquiry in the collection include the nature of the gods (1.6–8, 40–41, 3.60–63, 5.56–80, 9.46–50), divination (1.16–17), geography (3.104–105), and botany (3.106–107); see further n. 25 below.

²³ Ross (1987).

contributes to the soil some fortification that we cannot sense or else because it drives out any excess moisture (*Geo.* 1.84-93):

saepe etiam sterilis incendere profuit agros
atque levem stipulam crepitantibus urere flammis: 85
sive inde occultas viris et pabula terrae
pinguia concipiunt, sive illis omne per ignem
excoquitur vitium atque exsodat inutilis umor,
seu pluris calor ille vias et caeca relaxat
spiramenta, novas veniat qua sucus in herbas, 90
seu durat magis et venas astringit hiantis,
ne tenues pluviae rapidive potentia solis
acrior aut Boreae penetrabile frigus adurat.

(Often has it been useful to set infertile fields **ablaze** and to **burn** the *light* stubble with crackling **flames**: whether because from this treatment they conceive hidden potencies and *rich* nourishments, or else because every defect **is cooked out of them by the fire** and useless *moisture sweats away*, or because that **heat opens up** more pathways and invisible channels whereby *moisture* may find its way into new plants, or else **hardens** and **closes up** yawning passages, so that *light rainshowers* or the **excessive strength of the withering sun** or Boreas' piercing chill might not burn them.)

The play of opposites in this passage—hot and cold, wet and dry—clearly derives from philosophical principles that are familiar from Empedocles, among others.²⁴ At the same time, we see that the passage employs the common expository technique of multiple explanation, which is exuberantly exploited by Lucretius, among others. If we think back to the combination of Lucretius and Empedocles in *Eclogue* 6—where, as we have seen, the two philosopher-poets are to be identified through readerly inference, and not by authorial declaration—we will notice that a similar combination of incompatible elements is at work.

In the *Georgics* passage Vergil even seems to call attention to the fact that something unusual is at work; for the quasi-Lucretian multiple explanations that he offers here are not merely different from one another, and so equally likely to be right. Rather, they are as pointedly opposite to one another, in quasi-Empedoclean terms, as can be imagined. Such a passage hardly seems designed to indicate philosophical allegiance, one

²⁴ Ross does not believe that Vergil's use of these principles points to Empedocles in particular as a major source of inspiration [(1987) 71–72] but one could at least say that here is an area of common ground between Vergil and Empedocles. See further below, n. 33.

way or another. A more likely inference is that Vergil wished not to pass on to his readers any specific philosophical truth, but simply to combine certain characteristic topics of philosophical speculation with characteristic tropes of philosophical argument as components of an essentially poetic, not philosophical, discourse. It goes without saying that such gestures could only be made by a poet who was familiar with philosophical discourse, and they would be lost on a reader who was not familiar with this discourse, as well. But it does not follow that the poem should be expected to present a coherent philosophical perspective. Offering precisely contradictory explanations for a single phenomenon is one indication to the contrary. And there are many others in the poem.²⁵

It is obviously tempting to see Vergil's extensive use of the four-elements motif as evidence for an interest in Empedocles specifically. Ross however regards the four-element theory as residing in, as it were, the public domain, and not as the intellectual property of any particular philosopher or school. This is in keeping with his preference not to regard Vergil as the adherent or the opponent of any particular philosophy or school; and in general he must be right. By the same token, the use of multiple explanations, while frequent in Lucretius, is common to other philosophers. As we have just seen in the *Eclogues*, Vergil is eclectic in his use of philosophical and other sources. Without question, one of his aims was to couch his agricultural teachings in language that would recall the hard-headed, proverbial wisdom of Hesiod and Cato, the metaphrastic *tours de force* of Hellenistic masters like (especially) Aratus, the gentlemanly humanism of scholars like Varro, and the more strictly scientific perspective of philosophers such as Aristotle, Theophrastus, and many others.²⁶ So, on the one hand motifs like the four elements and

²⁵ Contradictions and false statements in the *Georgics* have been noted since antiquity and often accepted as if true even by those who knew better, such as Columella, in deference to Vergil's poetic authority (e.g. *Res Rustica* 1.4.4, 3.10.20, 3.12.5, 6.27.5–7). The elder Pliny was occasionally more independent (e.g. *NH* 17.19, 27, 120). Seneca recognized that Vergil's purpose was to delight readers rather than to instruct farmers (*Epist.* 86.15). On the early imperial reception of the poem see Wilkinson (1969) 270–272. In any case, blatant contradiction of common knowledge is not uncommon in the poem: see, e.g. Ross (1987) 104–128; Farrell (1991) 115–120.

²⁶ For the purposes of this discussion I define 'philosophy' a bit narrowly according to modern notions, but in ancient terms the *Georgics* are in fact quite heavily indebted to fields such as botany and zoology, geography, astronomy, and other subjects now considered sciences but in Vergil's time branches of philosophy. I exclude these areas from discussion to make the point that even without them the

multiple explanations can be regarded first as generally philosophical motifs. But on the other hand it is obvious that Empedocles and Lucretius have their specific roles to play, as well. The question is, just what are these roles?

At the end of book 2 when the *Georgics* poet discloses his ambition to comprehend the great philosophical topics of cosmology and celestial mechanics, he hints at his own sense of inadequacy in Empedoclean terms: he fears that the blood circulating within his chest may be cold, and his mind therefore unequal to the intellectual challenges of natural philosophy.²⁷ This is a specific and pointed reference to a doctrine that Empedocles is not known to share with any other philosopher. Similarly, in the *makarismos* of philosophers that immediately follows (*Geo.* 2.490–502) many have seen a reference to Lucretius in particular, and this, too, is difficult to deny, because it cites Lucretius' avowed goal of eliminating the fear of death by disclosing the causes of things, and it does so in unmistakably Lucretian language. The poem of course is full of such language; but just as Ross has argued that the ubiquity of the four-element theory throughout the *Georgics* does not make the poem an Empedoclean tract, neither does the prominence of Lucretian language, imagery, and ideas make it a referendum either on Lucretius or on Epicurus. It is certainly true that Vergil sometimes uses Lucretian language to make a point that goes directly against the teachings of Epicurus; and the *makarismos* has been adduced as a case in point.²⁸ In it two types of person are praised. First is the *felix* who is familiar with the *causas rerum* and—what points especially to Lucretius' Epicurean gospel—has overcome any fear of death, particularly the legendary torments of the mythological underworld, and on this basis is exalted as a figure of almost unattainable intellectual achievement (490–492). He is contrasted with the *fortunatus*, the farmer-poet whose knowledge involves a more traditional piety and acquaintance with the gods of the countryside (493–502). This contrast, in combination with some testimony drawn from the *vita* tradition, has led some critics to argue that the *Georgics* contains the record of Vergil's gradual abandonment of Epicureanism as a way of life.²⁹

Georgics remains a philosophical poem in the same sense as the *Eclogues* and the *Aeneid*.

²⁷ Empedocles DK31 B105; Cic. *Tusc. disp.* 1.19; Hor. *Ars Poet.* 464–466.

²⁸ Farrington (1963); Hardie [(1986) 40–46] more judiciously speaks of a 'remythologization' of Lucretian motifs in the *Georgics*, a reversal of a signature Lucretian technique, rather than of philosophical disputation as such.

²⁹ Klingner (1967) 271–272. For a characteristically balanced and persuasive view of the matter see Perkell (1989) 43–44.

But the extensive and complex Lucretian intertextuality of the *Georgics* cannot be reduced to such simple terms, nor is this naively biographical interpretation of the passage at all persuasive.³⁰

In the first place, it is hardly legitimate to regard Lucretius as merely a stand-in for Epicurus. The fact that so many readers have seen both Lucretius and Empedocles as points of reference at the end of book 2 itself argues against this. We have already seen that this pointed combination of Lucretian with Empedoclean motifs is found both in *Eclogue* 6 and in the contradictory explanations about the benefits of plowing in *Georgics* 1. And, as many have noted, Lucretius himself, in his generally scornful doxography of representative pre-Socratic philosophers, treats Empedocles with a level of respect and even deference that stands in sharp contrast to his demolishing of Heraclitus and Anaxagoras. In addition, David Sedley has made a convincing case that Lucretius actually begins the *De rerum natura* as if it were to be an Empedoclean poem and that Cicero, in his famous comment on *Lucreti poemata*, recognized the gesture.³¹ It is still impossible to say that one understands entirely what Lucretius means by aligning himself to this extent with Empedocles, or with any philosopher other than Epicurus. At a minimum, however, his strategy must have something to do with an effort to define his own place in a tradition of philosophical poetry. And if that is the case, it would only make sense to infer that Vergil was both aware of what Lucretius was doing and that in the *Georgics* he is following suit. To be sure, the poet's wistful meditation on the unlikelihood of his ever writing a truly philosophical poem in the manner of Lucretius or Empedocles is significant in a variety of complex ways. But among these ways is not, I would suggest, any possibility that he is announcing his abandonment of or opposition to Lucretius or Empedocles in particular, either as poets or as philosophers. Nor, if one considers the substantial presence of philosophy in the *Aeneid* (as we shall do presently) can we infer that Vergil is renouncing any pretension to the composition of philosophical poetry in the broadest sense.

I would venture the suggestion that this passage does draw a distinction between Vergil's project in the *Georgics* and those of both Lucretius and Empedocles; or, to put it another way, that it distinguishes the *Georgics* as a philosophical poem from the kind of philosophical poem that both Lucretius and Empedocles produced. And if one asks what kind that might be, a possible answer is that both of Vergil's great predecessors used poetry in the service of communicating a single, specific, coherent

³⁰ On Lucretius' centrality within Vergil's allusive program in the *Georgics* see Farrell (1991) 169–206; Gale (2000).

³¹ Cic. *ad Q. fr.* 2.9.3; Sedley (1998) 1–34, with further references.

philosophical system. This insight permits the inference, which comports with what we have already observed, that Vergil's purpose was to write a poem that could be understood as philosophical without committing himself to any particular philosophical system.

Again, the ancient commentaries provide a useful perspective. Despite a general conviction on the scholiasts' part that the poetry in some sense does or should reflect Vergil's personal beliefs, there is a considerable awareness that his poetic goals required an eclectic approach. In his comment *ad Geo.* 1.243, for instance, Servius notes that "just as the views of the philosophers differ, so Vergil as well says different things."³² Many of the philosophical references that Servius adduces involve the Epicureans (DServ. *ad Geo.* 1.247, 1.252, 2.478, 4.219; Serv. *ad Geo.* 3.525, 4.51), but some of the other philosophers and schools that he considers relevant are the 'physici' in general (Servius *ad Geo.* 2.483, 2.484, 2.490, 4.51, 4.399), including Thales (*ad Geo.* 4.363 with cross reference to 4.381; cf. DServ. *ad Geo.* 4.379 and (discussed above) *ad Ecl.* 6.31) and Heraclitus (*ad Geo.* 1.86); the Pythagoreans (*ad Geo.* 1.107; DServ. *ad Geo.* 4.219); the Stoics (*ad Geo.* 4.219); Theophrastus (DServ. *ad Geo.* 3.280); Plato (*ad Geo.* 4.153); and finally "Cicero and all the other philosophers" (*ad Geo.* 1.72). A few of these passages may involve wishful thinking on Servius' part, but the majority stand up as likely references to philosophical motifs and ideas.³³ However, unlike Servius' reading of *Eclogue* 6 as a biographical allegory, his *Georgics* commentary is relatively free of biographical exegesis.³⁴ This may help to explain why he takes Vergil's frequent references in the *Georgics* to different philosophical schools entirely for granted and feels little need to reconcile them with what he or others may think about the poet's own beliefs. Indeed, even Servius' awareness that Vergil moves back and forth between agreement and disagreement with the Epicureans in particular occasions

³² "et sicut variae philosophorum opiniones sunt, ita et hic varie loquitur" (*ad Geo.* 1.243); cf. his comment *ad Geo.* 1.72.

³³ To be sure, we can sometimes identify a more specific or a different source from the one that Servius names, particularly when he uses a general word like *physici* to identify a distinctive theory. For instance, having correctly identified the various topics of natural philosophy that the *Georgic* poet says he would like to be able to sing as aspects of "physicae philosophiae" (line 1 *ad Geo.* 2.483), in his comment on the very next line Servius goes on to identify the distinctively Empedoclean concept of mind (see n. 24 above) as being described "secundum physicos" (lines 1-2 *ad Geo.* 2.484); cf. *ad Geo.* 4.51

³⁴ Traces appear only in a few comments evidently meant to rebut the contentions of the *obtrectatores* that Vergil, as an Epicurean, should not have incorporated other philosophical perspectives into his poem: see nn. 36-38 below.

no surprise.³⁵ For instance, in commenting on the effects of the plague *ad Geo.* 3.525 he raises the possibility that Vergil writes in accordance with the Epicurean doctrine against conventional religion.³⁶ But *ad Geo.* 1.252, where the heavens are said to contain signs of things to come, he observes that the passage is written against the Epicurean doctrine.³⁷ In both passages the tone is matter-of-fact, and betrays no anxiety about orthodoxy or even consistency. In just one passage (*Geo.* 4.219), which I have quoted as an epigraph to this paper, does Servius allude to the fact that Vergil adopts contradictory positions regarding Epicureanism, noting that some readers had faulted him for doing so (or, more accurately, for departing occasionally from what they took to be his personal Epicurean beliefs). But here Servius goes on to say, quite sensibly, that Vergil's practice *as a poet* is simply to weave the opinions of different philosophers into his exposition, and that one should not automatically assume that he was in fact an Epicurean, even if in the sphragis to the *Georgics* he emphasizes the *otium* he enjoyed while living at Naples (DServ. *ad Geo.* 4.219). And in the note that follows on *Geo.* 4.221, Servius puts into practice his assumption regarding Vergilian philosophical eclecticism, explaining that Vergil's account of the bees reflects his understanding of natural philosophy (in the form of the four-element theory) and his conviction that bees partake of divinity in some form—both of these positions that are incompatible with Epicureanism—but that he makes his case by arguing from analogy in the manner of Lucretius.³⁸

³⁵ Pro: DServ. *ad Geo.* 1.247, 2.478; Servius *ad* 3.525; contra: DServ. 1.252, 4.219.

³⁶ Servius *ad Geo.* 3.525: "**Quid labor aut benefacta iuvant** si neutrum mortem repellit, nec corporis exercitium nec mentis religio: nam si generalis est sententia, secundum Epicureos contra religionem est; si autem tantum ad bovem refertur, hoc dicit: quid ei prodest labore suo aluisse mortales?" (**What good is hard work or good service** if neither thing staves off death, neither bodily effort nor spiritual piety: for if the expression is a general one, it accords with the Epicureans' anti-religious stance; but if its reference is only to the ox, he means this: what good does it do him to have sustained by his own labor those who must die?)

³⁷ Servius *ad Geo.* 1.252: **hinc tempestates** id est ex hac causa, ex hac ratione astrologiae, ex hac temporum scientia vel siderum observatione. et hoc contra Epicureos, qui dicunt acervum stellarum sine causa esse.... (**From this the storms** that is from *this cause*, *this* regular movement of the heavenly bodies, *from this knowledge of the seasons or observation of the stars*. And *this is against the Epicureans, who say that the mass of stars exists without cause*...).

³⁸ Servius continues this line of reasoning in his notes on 4.221, where he cites *Aen.* 6.724 on the concept of a world soul, and DServ. *ad* 4.226 (*nec morti esse locum*), where the idea that "there is no place for death" is compared to Lucretius'

Philosophical allegoresis is, however, a much more important factor in the *Georgics* than Servius realizes, and in ways that go beyond references to elements and atoms or to Empedocles and Lucretius in particular. The key figure, in fact, is Homer. The poem's finale, the Aristaeus epyllion, is composed almost entirely out of episodes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that had been interpreted by critics as allegories of natural philosophy.³⁹ Recognizing this fact does much to explain why the *Georgics*, a poem that owes so much of its form and content to "didactic" poets like Hesiod, Aratus, and Lucretius, concludes with miniature epic in the heroic mode. The point is that Homer, too, was widely interpreted in antiquity as a philosophical poet, indeed as the source of all philosophy as well as of all poetry.⁴⁰ We have already seen that Vergil may well have had this tradition in mind in *Eclogue* 3 when he included topics of natural philosophy in his imitation of Theocritus' cup ecphrasis from *Idyll* 1. By doing so, Vergil acknowledges that Theocritus' model, Homer's ecphrasis of Achilles' shield, had itself been explained by critics as an allegorical image of the cosmos. In the *Georgics* as well a sophisticated program of Homeric allusion combines Iliadic and Odyssean references with allusions to other, more frankly philosophical authors in preparation for the stunning, revelatory finale. But in the *Eclogues* natural philosophy is a motif that appears only occasionally, even if unmistakably and prominently, and in passages where the dominant concern is rather with aesthetics; whereas in the *Georgics* natural philosophy is a fundamental theme throughout. In this way it simply makes sense to infer that Vergil's eclectic deployment of philosophical motifs and ideas conform to and support his literary objectives rather than serving any end in themselves.

Philosophy in the *Aeneid*

If the *Eclogues* acknowledge in passing the idea that Homer was a philosophical poet, and if the *Georgics* concludes with an ambitious reference to this idea, then Vergil had ample reason, simply in virtue of the still more ambitious Homeric program that he follows in the *Aeneid*, to make philosophy one of the epic's central themes. And he begins the *Aeneid* accordingly. The storm scene of book 1, as Michael Murrin has well shown, casts Juno in the allegorical role assigned to her by Homer's critics as the element *aër*—or, as Murrin more gracefully puts it, as Queen

statement (*DRN* 1.671) that the death of anything really involves nothing more than the dissolution and redistribution of its atoms.

³⁹ Farrell (1991) 253–272; Morgan (1999).

⁴⁰ Buffière (1956); Murrin (1980); Lamberton (1986); Hardie (1986).

of the Air. It is of course true that Juno's motivations and her methods in the *Aeneid* are many, but there is no denying that, especially in books 1–5, her manipulation of the elements, and especially of air as the medium of storm and tempest, describes a vast and thematically central sphere of influence. In a less dramatic but highly symbolic sense, it is now generally appreciated that Iopas' song at the end of book 1 is modeled not just on Demodocus' tale of Ares and Aphrodite in *Odyssey* 8 but on an exegetical tradition that regarded Demodocus' song as an allegorical cosmogony: in keeping with this line of interpretation, instead of an adulterous love story Iopas sings an astronomical poem.⁴¹ This is a clear signal to the reader that Vergil's Homeric imitation involves not just the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but the philosophical ideas imputed to them, signaling the particular importance of exegesis that regarded both poems as symbolic representations of natural philosophy.⁴²

For this reason, then, readers must be open to finding a philosophical subtext at virtually any point in the *Aeneid* where Homer is a factor, which is to say, in any given line, word, or syllable. And the breadth of philosophical exegesis that was lavished on the Homer was by no means confined to physics: all areas of philosophy were thus available to Vergil for integration into his Homeric program. Accordingly, it is impossible to attempt anything like a complete or even a reasonably adequate survey of the topic in an essay of this brief compass. Instead, I shall examine a few passages that are of special importance from this point of view. First among them is the end of the epic, where Aeneas' *furor* has been correlated with anger as a topic of ethical philosophy.⁴³ And more broadly, the behavior not only of Aeneas, but also of such characters as Dido, Latinus, and Evander has been evaluated in terms of ancient kingship

⁴¹ Empedocles again comes into play, as Demodocus' song was allegorized as a representation of Love and Strife (Heracl. *Quaest. Hom.* 69.7–8). See Knauer (1964) 168; Hardie (1986) 83–84; Farrell (1991) 258–261; Nelis (1992); Morgan (1999) 94–96.

⁴² Not incidentally, the theme of the second song of Demodocus in *Odyssey* 8, the song that Iopas' cosmogony 'replaces' in Vergil's scheme of Homeric *aemulatio*, is the same as the song sung by Clymene among her sister nymphs in *Georgics* 4 (and so one of the passages involved in the presentation of Homer as a philosophical poet in the Aristaeus epyllion), while some of the actual lines in which the epic narrator summarizes Iopas' song actually quote verses in which the Georgic poet expresses his desire to encompass the most sublime topics of natural philosophy (*Geo.* 2.478–482). For discussion of this relationship see especially Nelis (2004).

⁴³ Galinsky (1988), (1994); Putnam (1990); (1995) 201–245; (2011).

theory, another ethical topic.⁴⁴ Frequently in such matters it is up to the reader to draw the connections: in contrast with other intertextual relationships, specific verbal indices (other than words like *ira* and *rex*) are generally scarce. And in general, Vergil's narrative intersects most clearly with particular philosophical *topoi* rather than with the specific tenets of any particular school.⁴⁵ Efforts to identify Vergil's treatment of such topics as 'anger' and 'kingship' with the teachings of any single school are, while instructive, ultimately unconvincing. And no wonder. The abundant philosophical commentary on Homer as a teacher of morality and ethics gives these and related themes an amplitude and a range that no single conceptual or sectarian framework can contain.⁴⁶ The *Aeneid* fully reflects this fact. Nor is philosophy itself necessarily the point. There should be no doubt, for instance, but that the hugely over-determined theme of 'anger' would loom large even if Achilles' *menis* in the *Iliad* were its single point of reference. But it is nevertheless true that Vergil's entire Homeric *agon* is powerfully and inescapably conditioned by a long and varied tradition of philosophical meditation on the emotions, on politics, on the cosmos, and on the fate of the soul that either illustrate or draw examples from the poetry of Homer.

In general, it seems most productive to regard any apparently clear-cut references to philosophical principles in the manner of *Leitzzitate*, the word used by Knauer to designate those ringing and unmistakable quotations of Homer that orient Vergil's reader as to the general narrative context of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* on which a given Vergilian scene is modeled. The point is that the *Leitzzitate*, while indicating a general frame of reference, do not establish a total equivalency between Vergil and his model. So with references to philosophical ideas: Latinus may be a paradigm of the bad king and Mezentius of the tyrant, but in the first place this is true from many philosophical points of view. In the second place even these characters are not entirely one-dimensional; even if bad kings—even if they are Mezentius!—they are not entirely unredeemed as human beings.

⁴⁴ Cairns (1989) 29–84.

⁴⁵ In a few cases individual passages or characters may align more or less exactly with a particular philosophical position. For instance, Cairns [(1989) 58–84] has argued that the behavior of Turnus defines him as more or less a type of the 'bad king' from the perspective of virtually any philosophical school. But most cases are not so simple.

⁴⁶ This perspective is reflected in the ancient opinion that Homer was the source of all philosophy and indeed of all knowledge, which is most clearly expressed in the 'theoretical discourse' that formed part (chs. 92–160) of the essay *De Vita et Poesi Homeri* falsely ascribed to Plutarch: see the edition with translation and introduction by Keaney and Lamberton (1996) esp. 19–27.

This being the case, still less can kingship theory be applied mechanically to the far more complex cases of Dido and, especially, Aeneas, whether in terms of sectarian allegiance or those of behavioral paradigms.

Where allusions to particular schools are found, we should not be surprised to find that a philosophical point established in one episode is inconsistent with what we find elsewhere. For instance, when Ascanius and his counselors offer Nisus and Euryalus lavish rewards for their willingness to take a message through enemy lines to Aeneas, Lucretian intertextuality permits (or rather demands) the inference that the Trojan leaders are acting in a fundamentally misguided way. Here, as I have suggested elsewhere, Vergil seems to write as if he were an orthodox Epicurean.⁴⁷ But of course in other passages he is anything but. This is certainly the case in what must be considered the most ambitiously and explicitly philosophical passage in the poem, Anchises' discourse on the fate of the soul, a passage in which even internal consistency and orthodoxy are conspicuously, even spectacularly absent. The language of the passage, as has been seen, contains more than a hint of Lucretius.⁴⁸ And once again Empedocles appears in the form of the four-element theory of the physical universe.⁴⁹ But the content is neither Lucretian nor Empedoclean. Instead it is heterogeneous to the point of incoherence, although the context encourages the reader to understand Anchises' teachings within a predominantly Platonic and Pythagorean frame of reference.⁵⁰ But here, perhaps more than anywhere else, the intertextual relationships involved are more complex than one can account for by appealing to any one source.

In the first place, as in the case of Aeneas' Iliadic anger, so too for his Odyssean catabasis it is Homer who provides the overarching conceptual framework, while contributions from other sources provide philosophical perspective and commentary on the Homeric narrative. Plato's "Myth of Er" was extremely prominent in this regard; and if we admit this much,

⁴⁷ Farrell (1997) 234–236.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Norden (1927) 309 *ad Aen.* 6.723 ff. or Austin's introductory note to lines 6.724–51 [(1977) 221].

⁴⁹ Air appears in the form of *caelum*, earth straightforwardly as *terras*, water in the epic periphrasis *camposque liquentis*, and fire as the ether that feeds the heavenly bodies, the *lucentem(que) globum lunae Titaniaque astra* (*Aen.* 6.724–725).

⁵⁰ And in fact, Platonism is quite prominent throughout the poem, as the ancient critics noticed: in Servius' *Aeneid* commentary Plato is cited more frequently than any other philosopher. The majority of these citations, sixteen in all, come from the *Aeneid*; and within that poem the citations are not evenly distributed, but tend to cluster in book 6, specifically where Anchises explains to Aeneas the process by which the souls of the dead are purified before being returned to new bodies.

then a very strong reason for the character of Anchises' discourse, other than an intellectual commitment to Plato per se, immediately suggests itself. Here, as others have seen, the influence of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*—the conclusion of his dialogue *De republica* and, as such, the Roman correlative of Plato's "Myth of Er"—must have been crucially important for its success in adapting Platonic eschatology to a Roman frame of reference.⁵¹ It is therefore an easy inference that allusion to this text involves Vergil not only with ideas and motifs that are original to Cicero, but with Cicero's interpretation of Plato, as well.⁵² Significantly, this interpretation includes the idea that Plato's philosophy was heavily influenced by Pythagorean ideas—an idea that Cicero articulates through the persona of Scipio Aemilianus not in the *Somnium*, but much earlier in the dialogue in a position that seems to give it programmatic importance.⁵³

The idea that Cicero bequeathed to Vergil a Pythagorean conception of Plato is borne out by the fact that in almost every passage where Servius detects Platonic influence it is influence of a sort that is compatible with Pythagorean teachings. This is the case not only in book 6 but in other parts of the poem, as well. For instance, when Venus, disguised as a huntress, encounters her son in book 1, she says: "Whoever you are, I hardly think as you live and breathe that you are not dear to the gods above (*caelestibus*, *Aen.* 1.387), having arrived at the city of the Tyrians" (*Aen.* 1.387–388). According to Servius, "[Vergil] said 'the gods above' in accordance with Pythagoras and especially with Plato, who confirm that the living are dear to the gods above and the dead to those below."⁵⁴ And several other comments indicate that Servius was highly disposed to think of Plato in Pythagorean terms.⁵⁵

But this is only what one should have expected. Quite apart from any specific lines of influence, Vergil's predecessors had made philosophical commentary on the project of composing a Homeric poem into almost a

⁵¹ Note that the *Somnium Scipionis* concludes the six-book structure of *De republica*, just as Aeneas' catabasis concludes the six-book structure of the first half of the *Aeneid*.

⁵² Within the phrase 'Cicero's interpretation' I include elements that Cicero himself learned from others. On this subject I have learned much from Bishop (2011).

⁵³ *Cic. Rep.* 1.15–16; see Bishop (2011) 84.

⁵⁴ Servius *ad Aen.* 1.387: "*caelestibus* autem secundum Pythagoram et praecipue Platonem dixit, qui confirmant vivos esse superis caros, mortuos vero inferis."

⁵⁵ Servius actually names Pythagoras elsewhere only *ad Aen.* 3.68, once again in connection with the fate of the soul, but this time to distinguish Pythagoras' conception of palingenesis from Platonic metempsychosis, *ad Aen.* 5.95, where there is no mention of Plato, *ad Aen.* 6.136 (golden bough), 6.295, and 10.564. On this subject in general see Setaioli (1995).

constitutive element of the epic genre. Ennius had adduced Pythagorean doctrine in support of his claim to be *Homerus redivivus*; Lucretius had cited Epicurean theory to deny any such possibility.⁵⁶ Anchises' discourse contains traces of both these interventions.⁵⁷ It is true that Platonic traditions, particularly those deriving from the "Myth of Er" by way of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, give Aeneas' catabasis a powerfully Platonic color. But Anchises' discourse is no more coherently Platonic than Silenus' song in *Eclogue* 6 is coherently Epicurean. Rather, in both passages Vergil accesses these along with other strands of philosophical inquiry in order to acknowledge the place of philosophy in the Roman epic tradition, not to articulate a coherent philosophy, and still less to assert his own, personal beliefs.

Of course, the conception of the soul's fate that is presented in book 6, while rich in Platonic and Pythagorean ideas, is nevertheless contaminated (in the literary sense) by motifs that are un-Platonic or un-Pythagorean and, in some cases, are even inconsistent with or repugnant to those philosophies, as we have already seen—to say nothing of the fact that Anchises' entire discourse—magniloquent, inspired, and full of *hypsos* as it undoubtedly is—is so incoherent in other regards. The point of the passage is to be magniloquent, inspiring, and full of *hypsos*, not to be intellectually consistent or coherent. In fact, the philosophy that it contains is so spectacularly confused that we more or less have to conclude either that Vergil was shockingly muddle-headed about such matters or else that it was not his purpose to state a coherent philosophical position. And, as should go without saying, the fact that this philosophy is articulated by a character, Anchises, and not in the persona of the author or even of the narrator, obviously argues against ascribing these views to Vergil himself.

⁵⁶ Ennius *Ann.* frs II–XIII Skutsch; Lucr. *DRN* 1.102–135.

⁵⁷ For instance, Anchises launches into his discourse with the consummately Lucretian word *principio* (used to begin an argument over thirty times in *DRN*) and then immediately introduces the motif of the four Empedoclean elements: *caelum* (air) *ac terras* (earth) *camposque liquentis* (water) / *lucentemque globum lunae Titaniaque astra* (fire), *Aen.* 6.724–725. He goes on of course to introduce the Stoic concept of a world-soul in which all creatures partake (726–727) and then a number of other concepts that are mainly compatible with Stoicism but are phrased in such a way as to indicate their Platonic or Pythagorean origins: see Austin (1977) 220–221 *ad Aen.* 724–751.

Philosophy in Vergil's career

Vergil's consistency in placing at the center of all his works such high-profile episodes, each infused with celebrated philosophical topoi, is perhaps chiefly responsible for his reputation as a particularly philosophical poet. All three works allude to natural philosophy as if by synecdoche for philosophy as a whole, and they connect this theme with the even more sublime one of eschatology. And the differing character of these interventions is probably responsible in no small part for the idea of ancient biographers that it is possible to trace Vergil's philosophical development from a relatively detached Epicurean perspective through a period of increasing engagement to an inspired stance of vatic apocalypse. A brief passage in a version of the life ascribed to Donatus (the *Vita Donati aucti*) describes just this line of intellectual development in the following terms: "he attended Siro's lectures on Epicurus' teachings, and had Varius as a fellow devotee of that doctrine. And although he inserted the opinions of diverse philosophers into his works, at heart he would himself seem to be an Academic more than anything else: for he preferred Plato's ideas to all others."⁵⁸ Like Servius' comment on *Ecl.* 6.31, this passage acknowledges Vergil's philosophical eclecticism, but attempts to circumscribe it within a more coherent set of dominant beliefs that, *ex hypothesi*, developed over time, framing it with reference to the poet's interest in two specific doctrines, those of Epicurus and Plato. The *vita* does not say explicitly that Vergil began as an Epicurean and ended as a Platonist, but it is consistent with this idea and seems to suggest as much. The assertion that he and Varius attended Siro's lectures agrees with what Servius says about Epicureanism (and about the identities of Siro, Vergil, and Varus lurking behind the personae of Silenus, Chromis, and Mnasyllus) in *Eclogue* 6. The statement that follows, that Vergil "inserted the ideas of many philosophers into his work," reflects the flexible attitude that characterizes the *Georgics* commentary and in particular the summary statement on Vergil's philosophical eclecticism that Servius makes *ad Geo.* 4.219. Therefore, although it is possible to read the concluding statement of the *vita* as attesting the author's belief that Vergil was fundamentally a Platonist all through his life, it seems at least equally likely that it refers to the prominence of Platonic motifs in key passages of the *Aeneid*, not least

⁵⁸ *Audivit a Silone [Syrone Vulg.] praecepta Epicuri, cuius doctrina socium Varum [Varium Vulg.] habuit. et quamvis diversorum philosophorum opiniones libris suis inseruisset, de animo maxime videatur ispe Academicus: nam Platonis sententias omnibus aliis praetulit (Vita Donati aucti 79),* Brugnoli and Stok (1997) 119.

of them Anchises' discourse on the fate of the soul, where the majority of Servius' references to Plato occur.

But we can consider this progression from the perspective of genre rather than that of biography. In all three of Vergil's major works, the center of the poem (or collection) contains a meditation on questions of the most elevated kind, fashioned in a manner appropriate to the poem's genre.

Regarding first the topic of natural philosophy, we have seen that *Eclogue* 6 presents this theme in the form of a cosmogony sung by Silenus, father of the satyrs. In *Georgics* 2 we find a comparison between the *felix* and the *fortunatus*, the intellectual masters of physical philosophy of rustic wisdom, respectively. And in *Aeneid* 6, the structure of the universe is actually explored by the poem's hero, who undertakes a journey, in the manner of predecessors such as Odysseus, Hercules, and others, to the land of the dead, where he listens to a philosophical discourse that explains that structure even more fully. The specific philosophical conceptions of the physical universe that appear in these three passages do not necessarily agree with one another, nor indeed is any of them rigorously consistent with itself. The point is never to rehearse a specific dogma, but to outline a more generally, and generically appropriate, philosophical frame of reference.

In *Aeneid* 6 we find a fully developed discourse on the fate of the soul involving death and rebirth in various forms including, for some, release from the cycle of metempsychosis to a godlike existence in the Elysian fields. *Eclogue* 6 and *Georgics* 2 do not address such eschatological questions, but they do arise in immediately adjacent poems or passages. In *Eclogue* 5 Vergil commemorates the death and apotheosis of the shepherd Daphnis.⁵⁹ In *Georgics* 3 he looks forward to celebrating the victories of Caesar (the future Augustus), whose divinity as a result of those victories is a theme that runs through the poem from beginning to end. In the *Eclogues*, then, Daphnis and Silenus, two exceptional figures who nevertheless stand for different aspects of the idealized pastoral landscape, seem to suggest that Vergil's bucolic poetry might be read allegorically for its philosophical content, an eminently sensible point to make in a pair of poems that look beyond the boundaries of the pastoral genre as traditionally conceived in order to give some sense of larger possibilities. In the *Georgics* a *makarismos* of philosophers and farmers followed by a celebration of Caesar's triumph similarly underlines the poem's central themes, namely that traditional wisdom about practical farm operations

⁵⁹ The motif of the death of Daphnis relates *Ecl.* 5 to *Ecl.* 3 (and both to *Ecl.* 10) via their common model, *Idyll* 1.

does in fact rest on the same scientific principles as does the structure of the cosmos, and that the poem's instruction in both modes is in some sense instruction about (and perhaps of) the man who will not merely run the farm, but rule a state of world-wide dimensions and world-historical significance. In the *Aeneid*, then, it only makes sense that the hero's journey to the underworld—a traditional epic locus of revelation—becomes the setting for a far-reaching physical and eschatological discourse. And it is hardly surprising if this discourse is tailored to the requirements of a heroic journey undertaken in the service of a nationalist conception of destiny.

Conclusion

Philosophy in Vergil is not an end in itself but a device that serves his immediate literary purposes rather than those of systematic, intellectually consistent speculation about metaphysics, physics, ethics, aesthetics, or what have you. It is therefore almost certainly a mistake to read Vergil's major works as tracing his philosophical development from a materialist to a spiritual orientation and from detachment to engagement. It may be that Vergil himself did undergo some such intellectual evolution, but from an evidentiary point of view we are simply in no position to draw this conclusion; and we should resist the temptation to do so, in view of the strong possibility of confusion and circularity that biographical criticism introduces into the interpretive process. A more secure position would be that the poems describe a philosophical *rota* parallel to the literary one that traces Vergil's 'ascent' from humbler to more sublime genres. The issue of personal belief is interesting in this regard. The position recommended here would not imply that Vergil actually believed any of the philosophies that he drew into his work, any more than he 'believed' in pastoral, but not in epic, when he composed the *Eclogues* and in epic more than in pastoral when he composed the *Aeneid*. Whatever other inferences we may be able to draw, references to particular philosophical doctrines or schools should be interpreted broadly as references to philosophy itself, as if the manifestly different opinions about important questions that define the various philosophical schools were in the end less important than a regard for philosophy as the discipline within which such questions could be properly formulated and discussed. To convey this intellectually generous attitude, Vergil cultivated a high degree of philosophical eclecticism informed by and subordinated to specifically literary goals.

Appendix: Vergil and Philodemus

The idea that Vergil was or at least started out as an adherent of Epicureanism derives from the ancient *vita* tradition.⁶⁰ But in 1989 evidence appeared linking Vergil and others in Maecenas' literary circle to the Epicurean philosopher and teacher Philodemus of Gadara. I refer to a papyrus fragment (*P. Herc. Paris.* 2) of a treatise *On flattery*, an essay dealing with the need for poets in particular to resist false or insincere praise, in which Philodemus addresses Vergil, Quintilius, Varius, and Plotius by name in the vocative case, which means that they are quite probably the joint dedicatees of the work.⁶¹ Horace more than once names all four men as his friends, and ancient commentaries on Vergil's works together with the *vita* tradition assign L. Varius Rufus and T. Plotius Tucca quite specific roles in Vergil's literary biography.⁶² Further, Horace's policy in his *Sermones* of delivering friendly criticism (*ridentem dicere verum*, 1.1.24) has been linked to a position developed by Philodemus' teacher Zeno of Sidon as summarized in Philodemus' own treatise *On freedom of speech* (in effect, a complement to the treatise *On flattery*).⁶³ In addition, another treatise by Philodemus, entitled *On death*, may have been the inspiration for Varius' mysterious poem of the same title.⁶⁴

These circumstances certainly make it easier to believe that Vergil and his friends once belonged to an Epicurean sodality. Their own friendship was evidently enduring, and we have no definite indication that any of them ever broke with the philosophy of the Garden. It would of course go without saying that each would have put his Epicurean beliefs into practice in his own way; and it can also be said and should be stressed that this would not have precluded devoting one's best energies to pursuits that were frowned upon or even condemned by Epicurus himself or from developing an interest in and borrowing from other philosophical systems.

With regard to Vergil, Nicholas Horsfall and Francis Cairns have summarized the situation very well. As Horsfall notes, "The depth of Vergil's personal commitment to Epicureanism remains altogether a

⁶⁰ See n. 1 above.

⁶¹ Gigante and Capasso (1989).

⁶² For a brief but impressive overview of the case for Philodemus' influence at Rome see Sider (1995) 42–45. The case is argued at greater length and from many perspectives (not all of them persuasive, however) by Armstrong et al. (2004).

⁶³ De Witt (1935); Michels (1944).

⁶⁴ Rostagni (1959) 386–394.

mystery.”⁶⁵ Similarly Cairns: “Although Vergil was a pupil of Philodemus ... and although his work reveals knowledge of Epicureanism, it shows no signs of strong or exclusive commitment to Epicureanism. Rather, Vergil’s keen interest in philosophy went hand in hand with a deliberate withholding of allegiance to any particular school.”⁶⁶ One could leave it there, but I would like to gloss Cairns’ formulation in two small but, I think, important ways.

First, to say that “Vergil was a pupil of Philodemus” runs the risk of exaggerating Philodemus’ importance to Vergil’s intellectual development.⁶⁷ That may not be what Cairns intended; but in any case I think it would be closer to what the evidence allows if one just said that Vergil was probably well acquainted with Philodemus and his teachings, almost certainly from reading his treatises and quite possibly from attending lectures and even participating in more intimate conversations, as well. But it certainly seems unlikely that Vergil’s knowledge of or perspective on philosophy as a whole derived solely or even principally from Philodemus. One could cite many reasons for this, but an important one is that Philodemus is an exceptionally hostile doxographer, while Vergil’s poetry, far from exhibiting a polemical spirit when it comes to philosophical questions, instead presents a broad and sympathetic knowledge of and interest in the characteristic ideas of a large number of philosophical schools.

My second friendly amendment to Cairns’ formulation tends in the opposite direction. I do not believe that we can confidently speak of Vergil’s “deliberate withholding of allegiance to any particular school.” I agree that an impartial survey of Vergil’s works from a philosophical point of view suggests as much; but we cannot and should not assume that the purpose of his poetry was to disclose (or, for that matter, to conceal) his personal beliefs. The poetry, read as poetry, gives us no reason to assert or to deny that he considered himself a committed Epicurean (or anything else) at any point in his life.

To some these points will seem obvious, and to others trivial; but the tendency to interpret the philosophical content of Vergil’s poetry in light of what we think we know from external sources is inveterate. Reading

⁶⁵ Horsfall (1995) 82. He continues, “That he studied with Philodemus now [i.e. in the light of *P. Herc. Paris. 2*] seems clear ... but we are as far as ever from understanding his beliefs, and the degree of Epicurean thought reflected in the text....” This is exactly right.

⁶⁶ Cairns (2004) 314.

⁶⁷ Horsfall’s way of putting it (see n. 65) seems to me to represent the nature of the student-teacher relationship in a way that avoids going beyond what the evidence warrants.

Vergil with a preconceived idea about his personal philosophical beliefs is a procedure fraught with adverse consequences in all its aspects. In terms of literary history, for instance, some influential perspectives on Vergil in the late nineteenth century translated his supposed rejection of Epicurus into a rejection of Lucretius as well. This view of the matter became very influential, and for a long time tended to oversimplify a complex and fascinatingly dynamic literary relationship. In terms of political commitment, rejection of Epicureanism has been regarded as one aspect of Vergil's growing enthusiasm for Augustus, while to some continued allegiance to Epicurus has seemed to betoken a stance of personal independence or even resistance. But we have learned in recent years not to confuse the Romans' interest in philosophical questions with a desire for ideological consistency.⁶⁸ Cicero tells us repeatedly that he had little use for Epicureanism, but this did not prevent him from occasionally citing Philodemus with approval; nor did this approval prevent Cicero from excoriating the man when the occasion demanded, as he does in his speech for the prosecution of the philosopher's patron, C. Calpurnius Piso.⁶⁹ The point is not that Cicero had no core philosophical beliefs, but rather that what he had to say about any given philosopher or philosophical question might be influenced by any number of concerns seemingly extraneous to philosophy per se. One of these was literary genre; and it is my contention that in Vergil, as well, philosophy is generically conditioned in a way that precludes any possibility of determining the poet's core beliefs by scrutinizing his poetry. In addition—and the point does bear repeating—the elements of Vergil's intellectual biography that are embedded in the ancient *vita* tradition are, in effect, a novelistic tissue of inferences drawn solely, or nearly so, from Vergil's poetry, rather than a body of independent testimony grounded in fact; and the appearance of philosophical development over the course of Vergil's career is an illusion created by his celebrated 'ascent' from the 'humble' to the 'middle' and, finally, the 'elevated' style in epic poetry.

⁶⁸ Useful remarks in Feeney (1998) 12–46 on compartmentalization.

⁶⁹ Compare his condescending remarks at *Pis.* 68–72 with the more flattering reference at *Fin.* 2.119.